DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 925 FL 007 757

AUTHOR Cooley, Ralph E.
TITLE Acquisition of Standard English Sentence Structures by Nonstandard Speaking Children. Papers from the Michigan Linguistic Society Meeting, Vol. 1, No. 3.
INSTITUTION Central Michigan Univ., Mount Pleasant. Dept. of English.
PUB DATE Oct 71
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Michigan Linguistic Society Meeting (October 9, 1971)
AVAILABLE FROM David Lawton, English Department, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan 48859 ($3.00 each issue)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; Dialects; Disadvantaged Youth; Elementary Education; Language Usage; Language Variation; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Sentence Structure; *Social Dialects; Sociolinguistics; Standard Spoken Usage; *Tenl; *Transformations (Language)

ABSTRACT

This study was based on a modification and extension of Greene's (1969) test wherein children choose structurally-transformed sentences which are synonymous with key sentences, thereby indicating recognition of the transformational relationships involved and internalization of those transformations. A similar test was devised to investigate the relation between dialect and reading ability. It examined in particular the following hypotheses: (1) Speakers of non-standard dialect will do more poorly on standard English structures than speakers of a standard dialect; and (2) Performance will be affected by the age of the non-standard-speaking children. Comparison of overall test performance among white, middle-class children with that of inner-city children does not substantiate the former hypothesis; yet the differences between control and experimental groups of comparable age are significant, confirming the latter hypothesis and provisionally confirming the former. Specific transformations and their treatment by test groups are discussed, as are pedagogical implications and possible explanations for group-specific difficulties. (DB)

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Acquisition of Standard English Sentence Structures by Nonstandard Speaking Children

Ralph E. Cooley
University of Michigan

In the TESOL Quarterly, Eugene Greene (1969: 189-195) presents the results of a study of children's ability to recognize sentences which have synonymous meanings but which differ in grammatical structure. Such recognition is, according to Greene (1969: 190) 'an aspect of linguistic competence' which involves 'an implicit analysis of [the] transformations [which] requires an analytic ability that develops gradually in children.

Greene devised a test in which the child is read a key sentence followed by two more sentences, one of which is synonymous with the key sentence but differing from it structurally through the application of a grammatical transformation. The third sentence is not synonymous with the key sentence but is identical or at least very similar in structure to the other choice. For example (Greene 1969: 190)

1. The girl showed the cat the dog.
   A. The girl showed the dog to the cat.
   B. The girl showed the cat to the dog.

The child is asked to choose which sentence is synonymous with the key sentence, thereby indicating his recognition of their transformational relation and his internalization of that particular transformation.

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Discussing the structure of the tests, Greene (1969:192) says:

> the use of three sentences for matching is preferable to two. Though two sentences require the child to retain less material, they also provide less context and apparently invite doubts about the exactness of fit. Asked to decide whether two sentences mean the same thing or not, a child may reasonably entertain the possibility that there may be circumstances and variables unaccounted for. And, in fact, children perform more poorly with two sentences at a time than with three.

Greene (1969:191) reports on the use of six basic types of sentences involving transformations related to:

1. Indirect Objects
2. Mood: Imperatives, Questions, etc.
3. Voice: Active, Passive
4. Adjectives
5. Synthetic and analytic genitive patterns
6. Pronominal Substitutions

Working with children who were between the ages of five and nine-plus, who were from middle income homes and who had at least one parent who was a college graduate, Greene reaches the conclusions that this ability is progressively developed over 'four to five years', with pronominal substitution, imperatives and questions being the earliest learned (Greene 1969: 192-3), while indirect object/object transformations take longest to master (Greene 1969: 194).

In the Spring of 1971, I modified and extended Greene's test for use as part of a larger investigation into the relation between dialect and reading ability. Two groups of subjects participated: seven fourth-graders, six white and one oriental, all between the ages of eleven and twelve and from middle income, university-connected families; and twenty-one sixth-graders from a predominantly black northern, inner-city school. One boy in this second group was white, with a southern background. His speech, especially in the phonology, was very similar to the dialect under study and was certainly non-standard.

Two hypotheses underlay the use of this test; both related to the fact that the test material concerned a dialect not 'native' to this group of inner-city children.

1. Speakers of non-standard dialect would do more poorly on these standard English structures than speakers of a standard dialect.
2. Performance would be affected by the age of these non-standard-speaking children, as it was in Greene's study although the ages concerned would all be older.

The format of the modified test was identical to Greene's and it included all of the original sentence types except those related to mood. Several other types -- all common in Standard Colloquial English -- were added. Of interest here are

1. Indirect questions involving <u>if</u> as a marker.
2. Subordinate conjunction.
3. Coordinate conjunction.

Further, the pronominal substitution category of Greene's test was subdivided into:

4. Indirect questions involving pronominal changes from the direct (quoted) question.

5. Pronominal substitutions involving person.

6. Pronominal substitutions involving number.

The particular dialect under investigation, so-called 'Black English', contains grammatical features which could be expected to interfere with recognition of possessive type synonyms; that is, it lacks the 's marker of the standard English possessive. In addition, it does not use if as a marker of indirect questions (Labov, et al 1968: 296-9). Typical of the speech of the sixth graders in this study was:

2. The janitor come in there and ask the teacher can he have some boys.

In all, three oral recognition tests were given to the children--two to the class as a whole using a tape recorded presentation and one which was administered individually with the examiner reading the sentence aloud. The two classroom tests were administered approximately three weeks apart and there was no evidence of initial learning. Sentence groups, whether presented on tape or read aloud by the examiner, were read slowly and repeated as often as the students felt was necessary for their complete understanding. In all tests the students recorded their choices on an answer sheet provided for that purpose.

A comparison of the performance of the white, middle class children (Group A) and the inner-city children of the same age (Group C_1) is given in Table 1:

Table 1

	Group	A	C_1
	# of Children	7	6
	Sentence Type		
1	Indirect Object	57.1	0
2	Passive	7.15	11.8
3	Adjective	7.15	8.33
4	Possessive	14.3	16.66
5	Ind. Quest. If-When	14.3	22.2
6	Ind. Quest. Pron.-Pers.	0	22.2
7	Subord. Conjunction	14.3	8.33
8	Coord. Conjunction	7.15	0
9	Pronom.-Person	0	25.0
10	Pronom.-Number	0	50.0
	Total Pronominalization	0	27.8

Percent of Error by Group

Greene's research demonstrated that the only sentence type which was still troubling nine year old middle class children was the type involving indirect objects. This type was also very troublesome to the eleven year old middle class children tested in this study, however, the inner-city children of the same age had no problem with it. Of considerable interest is the high percentage of errors which Group C_1 made on sentences involving pronominalization. Of the thirty-six sentence groups involving pronoun substitution of either type (person or number) ten were missed.

The error pattern of the inner-city children show general improvement with age, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Group	C_1	C_2	C_3	C_4	Total C
# of Children	6	8	4	3	21
Age (yrs - mo)	11-6 to 12-0	12-0 to 12-6	12-6 to 13-0	13-0 to 13-6	
Sentence Type					
1 I.Q.	0	6.25	0	16.7	4.88
2 Passive	11.8	25.0	8.33	11.1	16.7
3 Adjectiv.	8.33	12.5	12.5	0	9.54
4 Possess	16.7	33.3	8.33	33.3	23.9
5 IQ. If/When	22.2	8.34	0	0	9.54
6 IQ. Pron-Per	22.2	16.7	8.33	0	14.3
7 Sub. Conj.	8.33	6.25	0	0	4.76
8 Coord Conj	0	6.25	12.5	0	4.76
9 Pron Person	25.0	31.2	25.0	0	23.8
10 Pron. S/Pl.	50.0	12.5	0	0	19.1
Total Pronom	27.8	20.8	12.5	0	18.25

Percent of Error by Age Group

Possessive type sentences were a problem for all ages, indicating the possible presence of dialect interference; however indirect questions involving *if* were a problem only with younger children. In general, the older the children, the less problem they had with the test--supplying evidence of age grading. In Table 3 these four groups of inner-city children (Groups C) are compared with the children Greene tested (Groups B) on those sentence types on which they both were examined. It can be seen that a similar general pattern of improvement with age occurs in each group. Group A, the middle-class children examined in this study, are included for comparison.

Table 3

Group	A	B_1	B_2	B_3	B_4	C_1	C_2	C_3	C_4
Age	11-12	5-7	7	8	9+	11-6 to 12	12 to 12-6	12-6 to 13	13 to 13-6
I.O.	57.1	68.0	81.3	62.5	47.1	0	6.25	0	16.7
Pass.	7.15	64.3	31.2	50.0	12.5	11.8	25.0	8.3	11.1
Adj.	7.15	42.8	33.9	30.9	7.2	8.3	12.5	12.5	0
Poss.	14.3	71.5	31.2	41.6	12.5	16.7	33.3	8.3	33.3
Pron.	0	19.0	8.3	22.2	3.0	27.8	20.8	12.5	0

Percent of Error in all Three Groups

Taking into account the fact that the youngest children in Group C are a year or more older than the oldest children in Group B, the data presented in Tables 2 and 3 supply evidence to support the hypothesis that development with age would be present with these non-standard speaking children, although at a later age than with the children that Greene investigated, for whom standard English was the native dialect.

However, the hypothesis that inner-city children would do more poorly than speakers of standard English is not substantiated by this study, as evidenced by overall test performance.

Table 4

Group	C_1	C_2	C_3	C_4	Tot. C.	A
No.	6	8	4	3	21	7
Age	11-6 to 12-0	12-0 to 12-6	12-6 to 13-0	13-0 to 13-6	11-6 to 13-6	11-0 to 12-0
Error Rate	15.4%	16.8%	7.0%	7.25%	13.3%	12.7%

Total Error by Age and Group

Considering only the overall performance of Groups A and C_1, groups comparable in age and size although in different grades, it appears as though the inner-city children find this test more difficult. Even Group C_2, which is up to six months older than Group A, finds the test more difficult. Between C_2 and C_3 a change towards improved performance occurs, primarily in the pronominalization, passive and possessive sentence types; however, the total performance of the entire inner-city group, with fifteen of its twenty-one members older than twelve, is comparable with that of Group A, in which no one is older than twelve.

The data presented here is applicable to both the study of language acquisition and to the study of dialect. The development in children of the ability to analyze sentence structure is part of the overall task of acquiring language. This study further substantiates Greene's conclusion that such an ability develops over a number of years, but not at such a precise rate and order as he implies. Indeed, the data on the indirect object and pronominlaization transformations suggest that the order of mastery of individual transformation may vary widely.

This data also present interesting insights into

the acquisition of standard dialect by children whose dialect is not standard. Transformations which are common in both dialects, such as the indirect object:

3. Ann gave Mary a pencil. --→ Ann gave a pencil to Mary.

and adjectivalization:

4. The man who was busy got tired. --→ The busy man got tired.

seem to present no problem even in the youngest age group of the inner-city children tested. Those sentences types which are present in the nonstandard dialect in a different form than in the standard dialect--sentences which have undergone different transformational routes, as it were, in each dialect; such as indirect questions which contain *if* and which have undergone subject-verb inversion in standard dialect:

5. Mary asked if she could go to the store.

but evidence neither in the nonstandard dialect of these children:

6. Mary asked could she go to the store.

are somewhat more troublesome, but are mastered with time. The possessive, marked by *'s* in standard dialect but marked only by consecutive nouns in nonstandard:

7. That is my brother teacher.

appears to be much more troublesome, even at the older ages.

A possible explanation for this difference in difficulty is found in the type of transformation involved. The difference in the two indirect questions is based on the substitution of one grammatical transformation by another, and the resulting forms are clearly marked in either dialect. There is, therefore, a consistent and direct translation of the indirect question from one dialect to another. The nonstandard possessive, on the other hand, results from no such clear-cut process. It is much more likely that it is due to the interaction of phonological rules dependent upon stress and phonetic environment with grammatical rules. Its route is certainly more complex than the route of the indirect question.

Walt Wolfram (1970) has listed, in order of the amount of stigma placed on their use, nineteen linguistic features which are characteristic of Black English. He suggests that this same order should be used in any program intended to teach standard English to speakers of this dialect; i.e., the most stigmatized forms should be presented first and should receive the most emphasis. The data presented here indicates that another criterion may also have validity in establishing educational priorities

the more complex the phenomenon, the more difficult it is for the student to master, and the more emphasis it must receive.

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